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ABSTRACT

Points to consider when responding to a death in the yeshivah family for yeshivah educators are presented in this pamphlet. Using a checklist approach, questions to ask and actions to take in the event of a death in the yeshivah are listed. These include the following: (1) going to the bereaved student's home the night before the funeral; (2) making sure proper arrangements have been made; (3) making sure someone has explained what is expected of the student at the funeral and shivah; (4) knowing the protocol for calling on the avel and reassuring the student that he/she need not worry about missed schoolwork; (5) ensuring that a friend of the student's will be with him or her; (6) leaving a telephone number and making available for the family certain books on death and mourning; (7) ensuring that arrangements have been made for the avel's classmates to attend the funeral; (8) preparing the class by discussing their feelings; (9) being aware that some friends of the avel may need counseling; (10) arranging for some formal group expression of condolence; (11) remembering that additional counseling may be needed after the shivah; and (12) considering a special learning project as a means of further involving students and identifying with the avel. Special points to consider when reacting to death in the family of an elementary school student are discussed. Four questions in a quick checklist and a note on the value of a competent counselor conclude the pamphlet. (ABL)

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# RESPONDING TO A DEATH IN THE YESHIVAH FAMILY A HANDBOOK/CHECKLIST FOR YESHIVAH EDUCATORS

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TORAH EDUCATION NETWORK

# RESPONDING TO A DEATH IN THE YESHIVAH FAMILY A HANDBOOK/CHECKLIST FOR YESHIVAH EDUCATORS

by Joel B. Wolowelsky, Ph.D.

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[A related article by Dr. Wolowelsky on Death Education in yeshivah high schools appeared in the Tevet 5747 (1987, Vol. 1, No. 1) issue of *Ten Da'at*, the official publication of the Torah Education Network.]

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## DEDICATION

This handbook is dedicated to the memory of a gracious and noble lady, Dr. Edith Zwillenberg, ע"ה.

יהודית לאה
בת רי משה הלוי

Her selfless and devoted work on behalf of Jewish Education was precious and lasting. Her untimely death impoverishes us all.

יהא זכרה ברוך

## INTRODUCTION

The experienced yeshivah educator will find no great *hidushim* in this handbook/checklist. Indeed, this was written only to give the educator a chance to think through his or her response or proper initiative when confronted with a death in the yeshivah family. We hope that *mehankhim* will share their own insights and suggestions so that they might be included in future editions.

## WHEN DEATH STRIKES

It takes no great insight to realize that the death of a parent is a crisis of momentous proportions for a teenager. Caught in the natural but often tumultuous struggle for independence, the student suddenly finds him- or herself cut off from one of his or her main protectors/restrainers. It's a time of fear and confusion that calls for an immediate and effective support system.

Of course, there are many support systems in place for the student: family, relatives, friends and the congregational rabbi. More often than not, these people provide all the necessary support. Nonetheless, *it is the yeshivah which must assume responsibility for protecting and supporting its student.* Indeed, its response might leave an impact more lasting than for any other *hinukh* attempt. If no one thinks of calling the yeshivah to report the death, it is probably a symptom of the family and friends not perceiving the school to be an important resource/support system for its students.

## GO TO THE STUDENT'S HOME THE NIGHT BEFORE THE FUNERAL

There is simply no way of being sure that the proper support system is in place without physically going to the student's home the night before the funeral. *It is the responsibility of the rosh hayeshivah/principal to make sure that some faculty member goes to the home.* It might take only ten minutes to check out that the family is "all together," that relatives and friends have gathered to lend support and organize the funeral, and that the congregational *rav* is lending the proper direction and support. However, often it is the Torah educator who must step in and offer direction. Here are some things to check out:

■ Have proper arrangements been made? If the family is not *frum,* no one may have thought to call the *hevra kadisha* to arrange for a *taharah;* the student—if he or she was the eldest responsible person and had to make

funeral arrangements—may have ordered an inappropriate casket; and so on. Indeed, someone might have to go with the student to the funeral home to make arrangements. The family and community rabbi should be doing this, but the Torah educator has no right to assume that this is being taken care of unless he or she has checked personally. If non-*halkhic* arrangements have been made, the family might be grateful if you point it out or resentful for your uninvited intrusion into its personal affair. Dealing with this issue requires sensitivity and tact; in many ways it is a test of one's skills as a *mehanekh*. In any event, your primary purpose in going to the home is to provide support for the student and to help him or her deal with the issues.

■ Has anyone explained to the student what is expected of him or her at the funeral and *shivah*? As adults who have gone to many funerals, we sometimes take for granted that everyone knows the whole procedure. But the student *avel* may be worried about what he or she must do. All you have to do is ask: "Would you like me to explain to you what goes on at the funeral and burial?" Take your cue from the response. Don't force information on them, but don't leave them wondering about something about which they're fearful. Mention quickly that at the funeral the casket will be closed and that the *avelim* need not do anything on their own. Tell the *avelim* how *keriyah* is done. Reassure the *avel* that you or the congregational *rav* will be there all the time to tell him or her what to do. Mention that someone will say *kaddish* (at the burial) along with the *avelim*; there is no need to practice beforehand. (A note on girl's saying *kaddish*: Many authoritative *G'dolei Torah* e.g., Rav Y. Henkin, *zal*, and *yibdel lehayyim*, Rav. J.B. Soloveitchik, *shalita*—permit women to say *kaddish* in *shul* and even more *poskim* permit it at home. The *avelot* should be advised of this important option, although, of course, one should not act in conflict with the family's *posek* or congregational *rav*.) You should be sensitive to the fact that the student may belong to a congregation which follows *minhagim* that differ from those of the majority of your students. Don't assume that all *kehilot* have the same *minhagim*. For example, in some Sephardic communities, the *avelim* say *kaddish* at the funeral, not the burial, and *keriyah* is performed when the mourners return home.

■ If you will return home with the *avelim*, you can save a discussion of *shivah* until that time. Otherwise, mention some of the basic etiquette: They should not stand when someone comes in and need not introduce one person to another; if the *avel* feels tired, he or she can simply lie down in another room—even if friends are present. When you pay a *shivah* call, pay attention to the dynamics; you might pick up something to discuss with the *avel*. Reassure the *avel* that there is no need to worry about schoolwork missed. A weak student will need repeated reassurance—and special help when he or she returns after *shivah*.

■ Does the student have someone with whom to talk after you leave? There may be many people around, but they may be busy with the surviving spouse. Ask the student: "Which friend should I call to stay with you this evening?"

This gives the *avel* room to decline or accept without feeling that an unfair demand is being made on his or her friends.

■ *Leave your phone number.* No one should feel guilty about calling you at home in a crisis—that's what *hinukh* is all about. Leave a copy of Maurice Lamm's *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning,* Aaron Felder's *Yesodei Smoches* or (for a more learned family) R. Tukachinsky's *Gesher HaHayyim.* (Remember to inscribe it: "For the ABC family, *HaMokom Yinahem Et-hem . . .,* From the administrators and faculty of the XYZ Yeshivah." This concrete reminder of your concern provides psychological support and practical direction throughout the *shivah.*) Of course, in order to have a book to bring, *the yeshivah must have a supply on hand!*

■ Have arrangements been made for the *avel's* classmates to attend the funeral? Junior and senior high school students are, when properly prepared, certainly old enough to attend a funeral. Their presence is very comforting for the *avelim.* The classmates have to be notified, buses ordered at school expense, permission obtained, sometimes tests or school programs cancelled, etc.—all on very short notice. But there is simply no overestimating the support given by classmates showing up at the funeral (even if they come on short notice and were not "properly dressed"). It's the Torah educator's obligation to help organize this *hessed/hinukh* activity. (It will also be necessary to encourage one or two close friends of the *avel* to go along to the burial.)

## PREPARE THE CLASS

If time allows, it would be best to speak with the *avel's* class/*sheur before* the funeral. Everyone is upset, there is an unmentioned fear of the same thing happening to their own parents, and in addition there is the discomfort of not knowing what is expected of them at the funeral. While it is important to convey information and *hizzuk* to the class, the most important objective is to give the students the opportunity to talk about their feelings and thus not be trapped by them. The educator must avoid doing most of the talking in such a meeting; to lead the conversation too forcefully is to do a disservice to the students.

Some *mehankhim* may seek to avoid such a class meeting, maintaining it really is not necessary. It is possible that this reluctance stems from their own unwillingness to lead such an emotion-laden discussion. Indeed, in such a case it would be better for that faculty member to sit in as a more experienced teacher or guidance counselor meets with the class. Yet in the end, this is an educational activity that really must be mastered by the true *mekhanekh.*

We present here an outline for a discussion with an eighth or ninth grade class. This is hardly the only direction such a discussion might take, but the educator who has not yet conducted such a "session" can use it as a backdrop against which to plan his own talk. There is no "right" way of talking with the class; but there are certainly unproductive avenues that are worth avoiding.

■ Almost everyone would have heard of the death before school begins. Ask: "How many of you have ever been to a funeral?" Most probably only two or three would have been. Establish quickly under what circumstances they attended a funeral so that you can be aware of sensitive areas while talking to the class; you might want to watch the reaction of some individual students while the discussion continues.

■ Say: "You may have some questions as to what goes on at a funeral, and I want to answer your questions. But I'd like to touch on a few other points first." This establishes that you're there to help and gives you a predetermined way of bringing the discussion to a close: you need only come back to the details of a funeral.

■ Ask for a quick show of hands: "How many of you knew Mr./Mrs. XYZ (the deceased)? "How many of you knew that he or she was ill (if death was a result of a sickness)?" "How many of your parents knew him or her?" This gives you, once again, information regarding the group with which you're talking.

■ Ask: "How did you hear about the death and what was your reaction?" There will be a moment or two of silence here, as no one wants to be first. Almost always, someone will volunteer a reaction, and the factual question ("*How* did you hear?") makes it easier to speak out. No response should be given an immediate reaction; a nod of the head gives students the encouragement to express their feelings without fear, which is the primary objective of this session.

■ Hopefully, after one or two responses someone will mention "crying." If not, after a while simply say: "I'm surprised no one mentioned crying." The object is not to get confessions about crying, but to reassure the students that crying is indeed an *adult* response.

■ Ideally, one of the responses will be "frightened." If not, it too can be brought to the floor by saying: "Usually, people react by being frightened. What do you think they might be frightened of?" Here, again, the purpose is to show the students that they need not feel that their thoughts are in any way "crazy" or unnatural. Once expressed, these thoughts become quite controlable. You might also explore the reactions of their parents. It's valuable for students to know that adults often respond to crises with fear, emotion, etc. There is nothing grown-up about hiding feelings.

■ Quickly go over the details of the funeral. Ask if anyone intends to go to the burial. Generally, one or two close friends *and an administrator or teacher* should go to the cemetry with the *avelim*.

■ Depending on the timing, you can discuss the *shivah* period at this time or after the funeral. Students have many questions as to what behavior is appropriate. It would be best to let the details flow from a discussion of

the open-ended question of how should one behave during a *shivah* visit. But one way or the other, the students should be left with no doubt as to the nature of the visit: They are not there to take the *aveilim's* minds off their sorrow; it is quite all right to talk about the deceased—such discussion is indeed a *hessed;* it is quite appropriate to sit quietly and not talk to anyone; there is a protocol which requires simply sitting down when entering without greeting the *avel* and then offering formal *nehamah* before leaving; etc. All teachers who have taught the student Torah or secular studies should be encouraged to pay a *shivah* call. *It is necessary to schedule for one or two classmates to be at the shivah throughout the day.* Students will have to be released from classes, tests will have to be rescheduled, etc. But there is no excuse for leaving a student alone all day, and—especially if the *avel* was not particularly popular—this requires coordination from the school office. The Yeshivah might also have to assume responsibility for daily *minyanim* at the *shivah* house; this too will require rescheduling classes, tests, etc.

■ As *ma-aminim benei ma-aminim,* we know the importance of *hashkafa/ hizzuk* at such moments of crisis. But, unfortunately, this can be misused, and it's important to avoid certain pitfalls. If, for example, the "Torah answer" is announced at the outset, students get the message not to express their questions and as a result never get to work them out in a Torah framework. The *hizzuk* often stifles expressing one's feelings. Torah has nothing to fear from troubling questions; but educators must fear a situation in which students think it wrong to express their feelings to their teachers and *menahalim.* Hence the importance of first initiating a discussion wherein thoughts and emotions are expressed openly.

■ Either at this time or later in the week, discuss how to act when the *avel* returns to school. Let the classmates voice their discomfort. Explain that the *avel* will need some support, but that for the most part the *avel* must begin to reestablish a normal and regular lifestyle. A few off-the-cuff questions to classmates as to "How is XYZ doing?" will help you be aware of potential problems that must be addressed.

## SOME ADDITIONAL POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND:

■ Be aware that some close friends of the *avel* may need special private counseling. In some cases they are actually semi-mourners who are denied the formal support system available to the *avelim.*

■ Arrange for some formal group expression of condolence, such as properly inscribed *seforim* for the *beit medrash* or library.

■ Remember that additional counseling will be necessary *after* the *shivah.*

■ A *tsedakah* project or a special learning project (*mishnayot* are especially appropriate) might be considered as a means of further involving students and identifying with the *avel.*

## A NOTE ON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

It's difficult to give as clear an outline of how to react to a death in the family of an elementary school student. While most healthy high school students have more or less the same level of emotional and psychological sophistication needed to deal with this issue, in the lower school even students on the same grade level can differ greatly in their ability to confront death. Indeed, seeing a young child cry extensively over the death of a parent and then a few hours later hearing him or her ask when the deceased will return can make educators very uneasy if they do not realize that youngsters cannot really comprehend the finality of death. Here, then, are some general guidelines which must be adjusted to the sophistication level of each class.

■ It's necessary to give an opportunity for *non-verbal* expression. For example, saying a chapter of *Tehilim* together can be all the more important for children who cannot verbalize their feelings than it would be for high school students who can more fully appreciate the thoughts being expressed. Having first graders draw pictures for their bereaved classmates, for example, allows them to feel that in some way they have dealt with a crisis. Discussion should *follow* such activities.

■ *Answer* questions simply and directly. Be aware that your words can be misunderstood and misapplied. (Saying, for example, that *HaShem* loved the deceased and so took him or her to be with him in *Gan Eden* can leave a child wondering as to which good person—child or parent—will be next.) Raising questions for adolescents gives an opportunity to vent festering fears, but for young children it can create tensions. Work into the conversation a reassuring statement that "Of course, something like this hardly ever happens to children this young." *Listen* to what the children are saying.

■ Be aware of the needs of the *parents*. Young parents can be especially upset at the death of a fellow parents and unsure of how to respond. A short meeting for parents at lunchtime to exchange ideas and fears is usually in order.

■ The death of a grandparent is a crisis for an elementary school student, but it is usually dealt with on a personal rather than class level. We should note, though, that as this is a fairly regular experience for youngsters in elementary schools, serious thought should be given as to how the curriculum can be expanded to prepare students for such a loss without raising unnecessary fears.

## A QUICK CHECKLIST

■ Do students have the feeling that at the time of crisis the school is their support system? If not, it's time to give thought how to correct this situation.

■ Do you know whom to call to stop an autopsy, arrange a *tahara* or advise you if you see a psychological reaction that seems unhealthy to you? You shouldn't wait until you need these people to find out who they are. The time to be sure of these contacts is *now*, as you're reading this.

■ Do you feel comfortable handling these matters? If not, figure out who will do it for you.

■ Do you have handy a supply of Lamm's *Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* or similar books? You can't run to the *seforim* store every time a copy is needed; you should have 10-15 on hand. (Involved parents would also welcome a *sefer* if they suffered a loss.)

## A NOTE ON COUNSELING

An unfortunate consequence of the wider religion-psychology conflict is the mistaken perception that truly committeed *benei Torah* never need counseling or that the only competent counselor is a *rebbe* or *rav*. This sometimes forces a *mehanekh* to take on counseling roles for which he or she was not fully trained or inhibits referrals to a competent counselor. A *yeshivah*, no less than any other school, should have a staff of trained counselors (who are themselves *benei Torah*) fully integrated into the yeshiva staff.